

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY IN THE CHARACTERS OF KEATS' MAJOR POETRY

An abstract of a Thesis by
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The intention of this thesis is to prove that "negative capability" exists within the characters of Keats' major poetry. But a problem arises in defining "negative capability." In the introductory chapter the term is redefined as a speculation on a style and ideal of life, as opposed to a style of art, and the contention is made that Keats found a voice for his speculations on "negative capability" in the characters of his major poems.

The following poems are discussed: "Ode to a Nightingale," Hyperion, and Lamia. The discussions focus primarily on these three points: (1) the degree to which each character possesses "negative capability" (i.e., his ability for self-negation, empathic-identification, and disinterestedness); (2) the progression of the protagonist towards "negative capability" and his reactions upon achieving that ideal; and (3) the consequences suffered by those who fail to function with "negative capability." The "Ode to a Nightingale" and Hyperion deal primarily with the ideal aspect of "negative capability"; Lamia and, to some extent, Hyperion deal with the concept as a style of life.

The discussions attempt not only to prove that "negative capability" does exist within the characters of Keats' major poetry, but also to demonstrate the validity of the definition of "negative capability" as a speculation on a style and ideal of life, and thus to discover another dimension of Keats' elusive term.

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY IN THE CHARACTERS OF KEATS' MAJOR POETRY

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Chapter 1: Introduction--Negative Capability

The intention of this thesis is to prove that "negative capability" exists within the characters of Keats' major poetry. But first, before it is possible to proffer a meaningful exposition of this proposal, the problem of definition is encountered. Since "negative capability" in the characters of Keats' major poetry would be a meaningless phrase without a proper understanding of "negative capability," this introductory chapter will define that central term. To establish a proper understanding of "negative capability," the term, first, will be examined as Keats himself defined it; second, summarized as it is usually understood; third, amended and redefined as a speculation on a style and ideal of life; and finally, presented as Keats himself probably understood it. After thus clarifying the terminology, it will be possible to explain meaningfully how "negative capability" exists within the characters of Keats' major poetry and to proceed to the discussions of the individual poems.

II

Keats was probably the most "unromantic" of all the British Romantic poets. Whereas Romanticism was primarily

an expressive theory of art--a subjective and spontaneous overflow of the poet's personal feelings and emotions,¹ Keats' poetry was a movement away from self-expression towards almost classic objectivity. Seldom in the corpus of Keats' poems does one find the emotional cries of Shelley or Byron or passages which can be termed "Wordsworthian" or "egotistically sublime." Instead of self-expression, Keats strove for the selfless ideal of Shakespeare--the greatest poet, the ideal poetical character.

Keats believed that Shakespeare possessed a certain quality which set him apart from and above all other poets, and he termed this quality "negative capability." In a letter to his brothers George and Tom, he wrote: "I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously--I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."² Keats

¹M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp (New York: Norton, 1953), pp. 21-26.

²Hyder Edward Rollins, ed., The Letters of John Keats (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), I, 193. Subsequent references to this edition will be mentioned as Letters.

thought that this quality of "negative capability" was Shakespeare's greatest asset; but, left to stand alone, without any further explanation, this definition is incomplete. In reacting to Keats' quotation, one must ask how Shakespeare achieved "negative capability" and for what purpose. And the answer to these questions is found in Keats' comments on the poetical character:

As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself--it has no self--it is every thing and nothing--It has no character--it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated--It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity--he is continually in for--and filling some other Body--The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of

impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute--the poet has none; no identity--he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures.... When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to so press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated--not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of children.³

After examining Keats' comments on the poetical character, one sees how "negative capability" is achieved: before the poet can be capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, he must fulfill the requirements of the poetical character--he must negate his self and participate in empathic-identification. Thus, "negative capability," as Keats defined it, becomes a process involving three stages: (1) self-negation, (2) empathic-identification, and (3) disinterestedness. And the process can be justly termed "negative capability" because the first two stages are prerequisites for the third. As to the purpose of "negative capability," one may conclude that, since Keats defined his concept in terms of Shakespeare and the poetical character,

³Ibid., I, 386-87.

it must in some way pertain to the poet or his poetry.

Indeed, for a long time, the consensus of critics has been that Keats' elusive term has applied exclusively to the "objective and impersonal aspect of Shakespeare" or to the "qualities in an artist's work which enable him to avoid in it the expression of his own personality."⁴ In brief, "negative capability" has found its basis in art. A summary of how "negative capability" would be explained from the artistic point of view will illustrate this point. According to Keats--critics would agree--Shakespeare, as the ideal poetical character, was first able to negate his self--he was capable of becoming negative. Then, once his personal identity was negated, he was able to empathize and identify with whatever he saw--there being no subjective self to restrain his powers of empathy. Finally, after having fulfilled the requirements of the poetical character, Shakespeare was able to avoid expressing his own personality in his art and thus was able to portray all the many aspects of life from their respective points of view. He was, indeed, "myriad-minded," truly a "thoroughfare of thoughts." In brief, Shakespeare functioned with "negative capability" because his plays--completely objective and Shakespeare-free--are a testimony to the fact. This is the way in which

⁴William Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature (New York: Odyssey Press, 1960 [1936/]), p. 310.

most critics understand "negative capability." And many notable critics, especially Walter Jackson Bate, have emphasized heavily the aspect of empathic-identification, coupling it with Keats' comments on intensity and the imagination. Thus, critics such as Bate have soundly packaged "negative capability" as part and parcel of Keats' poetical creed, and there it remains.⁵

This interpretation of "negative capability" as it relates to art is sound. However, there are other aspects of the concept which critics have heretofore failed to notice. For example, upon examining Keats' own definition of "negative capability" again, one discovers that he does not refer specifically to poetry, but rather to the poet and the poet's function in life in general. In his remarks on the concept, Keats speaks specifically of the poetical character and the "Man of Achievement" and not of poetry. In fact, Keats' comments on "negative capability" primarily amount to a list of the prerequisites that the poet must fulfill if he is to become the ideal poetical character and a "Man of Achievement." True, it may be argued that the poet must achieve "negative capability" before he can create Shakespearian art; the point will be readily granted. But even here, Keats' concept is neglected as it relates to

⁵For a further discussion of "negative capability," see Bate, John Keats (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 233-63.

life--not to poetry or even the poet, but to man in general and to the kind of life he must live if he is ever to become a "Man of Achievement."

A case can be made for "negative capability" as a style and ideal of life, and the following section will redefine the concept in those terms.

III

As has already been noted, "negative capability" does relate to art. Keats' remarks on the poetical character do refer directly to the poet and his relation to art, and on another occasion he calls outright for an objective poetry which does not bulge with its author's personality: "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us--and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great and unobtrusive."⁶ These remarks provide sufficient evidence to prove the validity of "negative capability" as a concept which relates to art, but the point is that they do not provide sufficient evidence to disprove or reject any other interpretation of the concept. On several other occasions Keats makes direct remarks about a theory of poetry which have little or no relation to "negative capability" as he himself defines it. For example, he

⁶Letters, I, 224.

writes:

In Poetry I have a few Axioms, and you will see how far I am from their Centre. Ist I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity--it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance--2nd Its touches of Beauty should never be half way thereby making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the Sun come natural natural too him--shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight--but it is easier to think what Poetry should be than to write it--and this leads me on to another axiom. That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.⁷

The critic would have to stretch these comments quite far to make them fit into Keats' literal definition of "negative capability." And even if these comments do somehow relate to "negative capability," they relate to only one facet of a multi-faceted concept--and they do not pertain here. The point is that quotations such as the above indicate that Keats might have had something more in mind when speaking

⁷Ibid., I, 238.

of "negative capability" than just poetry or the poet's relation to poetry. And furthermore, other remarks made by Keats directly on the topic of "negative capability" definitely prove that by "negative capability" Keats also meant a style and ideal of life.

Perhaps the most obvious evidence in support of this contention occurs in this famous passage from the "negative capability" letter: "I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously--I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." In this passage Keats does not allude to Shakespeare as a great poet, or as a poet who produced objective impersonal art, but as a "Man of Achievement." And by "Man of Achievement," he does not mean specifically the poet, or even the literary man, but man in general. Keats seems to be implying here that all men of achievement, even if they are not poets, must possess "negative capability." By relating "negative capability" to the "Man of Achievement," Keats does not limit the scope of his concept to poets or poetry (a task left to the labor of twentieth-century critics); thus "negative capability" assumes a broader connotation, relating to life in general.

As further proof of this contention, Keats makes this comment on men of genius and power: "Men of Genius are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect--but they have not any individuality, any determined Character. I would call the top and head of those who have a proper self Men of Power."⁸ These men of genius and power are men who possess "negative capability." Their "proper self" is not a self at all, for their identities have been negated and they have no individuality. They are selfless creatures who can react to all mankind like "ethereal Chemicals" (a phrase probably synonymous with empathic-identification). And therefore, since they have no determined character, they can function with disinterestedness in a climate of mystery and doubt. Again, one can readily see that "negative capability" does not always relate to poetry or the poet. For Keats, "negative capability" was often a concept in which man was required to live a selfless, empathic, and disinterested existence. And this existence or style of life required by "negative capability" enabled man to become a "Man of Achievement," genius, and power; and, when pursued to the most intense extreme, became an ideal in itself, enabling man to attain the heights of immortality.

Thus "negative capability" was a style and ideal of life for Keats, and this is the definition of the concept

⁸Ibid., I, 184.

that will be employed in this thesis. But to substantiate this definition further, the following sections will be devoted to presenting a thorough picture of how Keats himself probably understood his concept and to explaining just how "negative capability" exists within the characters of his major poems.

IV

Early in his career Keats was influenced by William Hazlitt. It seems that he was most attracted to the concept of disinterestedness which Hazlitt expounded in his essay, "The Principles of Human Action." Hazlitt wrote his treatise to refute the Hobbesian claim that all men are basically selfish and that their actions are entirely self-motivated. To summarize the argument: Hazlitt contends that man is not basically selfish because he can identify himself with his future self--a self which he imagines himself to be some time in the future and a self which is a completely different being from the person he is at the present moment. And since he can negate his personal identity to empathize or identify with another being (an action which is not self-motivated), man is not basically selfish, but disinterested.⁹ It seems

⁹The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P. P. Howe (New York: Ams Press, 1967), I, 1-49.

obvious that Keats borrowed Hazlitt's ideas on self-negation and empathic-identification and applied them in his remarks on the poetical character--the first two stages of "negative capability." But Keats applied the term "disinterestedness" in another, more literal, sense to his own concept. To be disinterested means to be free from selfish motive or interest, but it also implies a sort of laziness, a state of passive receptivity, and not an active quest for fact and reason. This concept of disinterestedness, as Keats redacts it, finds its best metaphor in a letter which he wrote to John Reynolds:

It has been an old Comparison for our urging
on--the Bee hive--however it seems to me that
we should rather be the flower than the Bee--
for it is a false notion that more is gained
by receiving than giving--no the receiver
and the giver are equal in their benefits--
The flower I doubt not receives a fair guerdon
from the Bee--its leaves blush deeper in the
next spring--and who shall say between Man and
Woman which is the most delighted? Now it is
more noble to sit like Jove than to fly like
Mercury--let us not therefore go hurrying
about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing
here and there impatiently from a knowledge
of what is to be arrived at: but let us open

our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive.¹⁰

Keats is speaking of disinterestedness here, and one can readily see how the term applies--indeed, is synonymous with his literal definition of "negative capability": the ability of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact or reason. Also, judging from the context of Keats' letter, it is evident that he is referring to a kind of life style rather than a style of art.

Moreover, in another letter, Keats praises the quality of disinterestedness in two of the world's greatest men: "I have no doubt that thousands of people never heard of have had hearts completely disinterested: I can remember but two--Socrates and Jesus--their Histories evince it."¹¹ Certainly these two men were men of genius, achievement, and power (although neither was a poet), and both possessed the quality of "negative capability."

A contrast to Keats' praise and advocacy of "negative capability" is found in his comments on selfish men, and his description of Charles Dilke--a man who led a "consequitive" approach to life. First, Keats condemns selfish men: "The worst of Men are those whose self interests are their

¹⁰Letters, I, 232.

¹¹Ibid., II, 80.

passion--the next those whose passions are their self-interest."¹² Such men as these obviously cannot negate their powerful egos. They cannot empathize or identify with others because of their own selfish interests and passions and therefore cannot attain "negative capability." Keats must have felt quite strongly about the worth of his concept to issue such a condemnation of selfishness. Second, Keats reinforces his belief in "negative capability" as a style of life by criticizing the life style of his friend Charles Dilke: "Dilke was a Man who cannot feel he has a personal identity unless he has made up his Mind about everything.... Dilke will never come at a truth as long as he lives; because he is always trying at it."¹³ Dilke is a perfect example of what Keats would call a "consequitive man."¹⁴ This term is very important in the corpus of Keats' thought because the "consequitive man" is the antithesis of the man who possesses "negative capability." The "consequitive man" can never let anything go without knowing all there is to know about it. He is in fact a scientist, and one can see

¹²Ibid., II, 243.

¹³Ibid., II, 213.

¹⁴"Consequitive" literally means successive; but as Keats uses the term, it means rational, logical, mathematical, and scientific. The "consequitive man" is an incessant reasoner, always seeking answers and facts. He cannot function in a climate of mystery and doubt and thus does not possess "negative capability."

how strongly Keats opposed his style of life. (It is also interesting to note here that Charles Dilke was the fellow with whom Keats had the "disquisition" which precipitated the initial comment on "negative capability.")

From these examples, it is evident that Keats actually did understand "negative capability" as a style and ideal of life. But, in proving the validity of this definition, the impression should not have been conveyed that Keats preached a philosophy of "negative capability." Though it is true he believed that "negative capability" was an ideal which could afford him a glimpse of eternity, he never posited a rigid doctrine of this belief. No, for Keats, "negative capability" was not a philosophy, but a speculation, a speculation on a style of life which greatly attracted him, yet at the same time posed problems which chewed and annoyed him. It was a speculation which appealed to his highest ideals, but conflicted with his personality. To balance Keats' advocacy of "negative capability," some of the conflicts he encountered with his concept will be listed. Such a list will aid in understanding how Keats himself understood "negative capability."

First, in terms of the poet and his art, Keats' concept stood diametrically opposed to the current Romantic theory of poetry. In his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" Wordsworth defined poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of

powerful feelings,"¹⁵ and Shelley and Byron followed him with their hearts on their shirtsleeves. Poor Keats was alone in the wake of Shakespeare. A poet who supported an objective, impersonal style of art stood shakily in the gushing cascade of Romantic emotionalism. And such serious opposition from current romantic taste (including a reading public that was literally unresponsive to Keats' poems) often gave the young poet serious pangs of doubt about his own ideas on the poet and his art.¹⁶ Second, on a more personal level, Keats encountered a conflict between his ideal of disinterestedness and resolution to devote himself to an active life of study. In the sonnet "What the Thrush Said," Keats cries: "O fret not after knowledge"¹⁷; but in a letter to his brothers he writes: "I cannot bear to be uninterested or unemployed, I who for so long a time, have been addicted to passiveness."¹⁸ This conflict disturbed the young poet, but the answer to his dilemma can be easily solved. Keats himself unknowingly gave the answer when he made this remark about Solomon: "I mean to follow Solomon's

¹⁵The Prelude, Selected Poems and Sonnets, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1954), p. 5.

¹⁶Bate, pp. 325-28.

¹⁷Letters, I, 233.

¹⁸Ibid., I, 214.

directions of 'get Wisdom--get understanding'."¹⁹ The point is that disinterestedness without a profound knowledge of life would amount to nothing more than passive ignorance or vegetation. In brief, Keats must know life, and study is one way to acquire that knowledge. Third, despite his ideal of the selfless poet (and despite his seeming contempt for the reading public),²⁰ Keats was spurred on by an acute desire for fame. While composing Endymion, he wrote: "...when I consider that this is a great task, and that when done it will take me but a dozen paces towards the Temple of Fame--it makes me say--God forbid that I should be without such a task!"²¹ And finally, despite his personal desire for selflessness, on love's field Keats was possibly the most impetuous of the Romantic poets (excepting only Byron)--no more need be said of his relationship with Fanny Brawne.

But despite all his artistic and personal conflicts with "negative capability," Keats was never so blind as to be unable to recognize and analyze the cause of his difficulties. The astute poet wrote: "I am too young to annihilate self."²² And in one short sentence he neatly recognizes,

¹⁹Ibid., I, 271.

²⁰Ibid., I, 267.

²¹Ibid., I, 170.

²²Ibid., I, 292.

analyzes, and sums up all his conflicts with "negative capability"--in terms of "negative capability." Indeed, it has been justly said that Keats was his own best critic.

V

So finally, it is now possible to explain meaningfully how "negative capability" exists within the characters of Keats' major poetry. At this point it should be obvious that Keats actually did understand "negative capability" as a style and ideal of life, and that, if anything, he was highly preoccupied with the concept. In fact, so profound was Keats' preoccupation with "negative capability" that, despite all his efforts to create a totally objective and impersonal art, he could not help expressing his ideas about the concept in the characters of his major poems. Keats found a mouthpiece for his speculations on "negative capability" in the characters of his major poetry, and the remainder of this thesis will attempt to prove this contention.

Since Keats was not preoccupied with "negative capability" in all of his poetry, this study will be limited to three major poems: the "Ode to a Nightingale," Hyperion, and Lamia. The discussions of these poems will focus primarily on the following factors: (1) the degree to which each character possesses "negative capability" (i.e., his ability for self-negation, empathic-identification, and

disinterestedness); (2) the progression of the protagonist towards "negative capability" and his reactions upon achieving that ideal; and (3) the consequences suffered by those who fail to function with "negative capability." These discussions will attempt not only to prove that "negative capability" does exist within the characters of Keats' major poetry, but also to demonstrate the validity of the definition of "negative capability" as a speculation on a style and ideal of life, and thus to discover another dimension of Keats' elusive term.

Chapter 2: "Ode to a Nightingale"

Of all of Keats' poems, the "Ode to a Nightingale" is probably his most direct discussion of "negative capability"; indeed, it is the principal theme of the poem. In the "Ode" Keats is heavily preoccupied with "negative capability" as an ideal which greatly appeals to him, yet at the same moment frightens and seems to put him off. As the protagonist of the poem, Keats progresses from the burden of selfhood to the heights of "negative capability" and then returns to his "sole self." The "Ode" is, in fact, a miniature drama of the poet's personal experience of "negative capability." Furthermore, it is a completely objective rendering of that experience with absolutely no judging or moralizing attached to it. Thus, at the end of the "Ode" Keats quits the reader with these disturbing questions: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/ Fled is that music:--Do I wake or sleep?".¹

In this chapter, the "Ode to a Nightingale" will be discussed stanza by stanza, line by line, image by image, to discover exactly what Keats does experience. The journey will be taken with Keats from selfhood to "negative

¹Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of Keats, ed. Harold Edgar Briggs (New York: Random House, 1967 [1951]), p. 293. References to Keats' poetry are to this edition.

capability" and then back again; and after the experience is completed, an attempt will be made to answer those questions with which he left off. Such an examination of the "Ode" will, first, demonstrate that "negative capability" is the principal theme of the poem; and second, discover the reason why Keats could not sustain the ideal moment of "negative capability"--why he suffered a conflict between the ideal and reality, between the imagination and sense perceptions.

II

But first, some background information about the origin of the "Ode to a Nightingale" should be presented. Although it is hackneyed and well-known, Charles Brown's account of the origin of the "Ode" is still worth relating:

In the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table to the grass-plot under a plum-tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind his books. On inquiry, I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale.

The writing was not well legible; and it was difficult to arrange the stanzas on so many scraps. With his assistance I succeeded, and this was his "Ode to a Nightingale," a poem which has been the delight of every one.²

True, Brown's account provides little insight into the meaning of the poem, but it does indicate that Keats found his primary inspiration for the "Ode" in the actual sense perception of a breathing, singing nightingale--a point which will be discussed at greater length later.

In addition to Brown's account, it would be helpful to remember this passage which Keats had written in a letter on the illness of his brother Tom some months earlier: "I wish I could say Tom was any better. His identity presses upon me so all day that I am obliged to go out--and although I intended to have given some time to study alone I am obliged to write, and plunge into abstract images to ease myself of his countenance his voice and feebleness."³ The suggestion here is not that this passage was Keats' inspiration in writing the "Ode," or that it indicates a possible source other than Brown's. However, this passage is important

²E. De Selincourt relates Brown's account of the origin of the "Ode to a Nightingale" in the notes of his edition of The Poems of John Keats (London: Methuen, 1926), 5th ed., pp. 472-73.

³Letters, I, 369.

in that it suggests a parallel between the poet's mood and course of action at the time of writing the letter and at the time of composing the "Ode." In both cases he commences in a state of self-concern, and in both cases he resolves to correct that state by similar means⁴--a point which will be discussed shortly.

III

In Stanza One, Keats, as the protagonist of the poem, is in a complex, paradoxical sort of mood. He seems initially concerned with his self, drowning in sorrows: "My Heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains/ My sense"; yet at the same moment he appears to be in a very disinterested and passively receptive mood:

...as though of hemlock I had drunk,

Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk.

He seems to have almost forgotten himself and to have reduced himself to a state of selflessness (i.e., Keats' state of mind here is similar to his state of mind on the morning he composed the famous letter to Reynolds and the sonnet "What the Thrush Said"--both of which expound a doctrine of

⁴A similar parallel occurs between the letter Keats wrote on the worthlessness of love, ambition, and poetry (Letters, II, 78-79) and the "Ode on Indolence."

disinterestedness and passive receptivity).⁵ But, while Keats appears to be in this paradoxical selfish-selfless state, it seems that he is inclining more towards selflessness because his imagination is working and he is capable of empathy: "Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,/ But being too happy in thine happiness." So the first stanza presents a sort of dualism in Keats with an inclination towards "negative capability."

However, as Stanza Two commences, Keats slips off on a tangent by expressing a desire for wine: "O, for a draught of vintage...." The initial reference to hemlock and opiate in Stanza One has probably triggered the association with wine in Stanza Two; in any case, the allusion to wine transforms the initial, paradoxical mood of selfish depression and selfless empathy to one of a desire for escape: "That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,/ And with thee fade away into the forest dim." Simply said, Keats wants to fly with the nightingale, away from his troubles, using wine as the vehicle for the flight. There is, however, a certain difficulty with wine. And the difficulty is that although wine may provide a vehicle for an escape from life, it does not in any way deal with an ideal of life--either imaginative or real. It deadens the senses and thus the poet. Hence, wine is not the solution to Keats' troubles,

⁵Letters, I, 232-33.

as he is soon to discover.

In Stanza Three, one discovers exactly what Keats wants to escape:

The weariness, the fever, and the fret

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,

Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and
dies.

One can readily see how this quotation relates to Keats' earlier comment on the illness of his brother Tom. In the "Ode" the poet seems to be experiencing the same sensations of burden and depression that he felt in his brother's illness, and at this point in the "Ode" he wants simply to escape it all. But escape, in either instance, is no solution. Again, it provides the poet with no real sense of solace or satisfaction and merely postpones the inevitable confrontation with reality. So, at the end of Stanza Three, Keats, in effect, has to decide what course of action to pursue. This choice is extremely important, for his course of action will determine what exactly he is to achieve. In the letter on his brother, Keats chose to absorb himself in "abstract images." What Keats meant by "abstract images" is unclear; whether he meant philosophical or metaphysical speculations, or ideas or ideals, is not known. What is known, however, is that in the "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats chose neither the escape of wine nor the absorption into

"abstract images," but "Poesy":

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,

Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,

But on the viewless wings of Poesy.

And to create the type of poetry that Keats considered ideal, the poet had first to achieve "negative capability." The point is, though, that in the "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats' primary concern is not so much poetry as it is the poet and especially the poet's experience of "negative capability." In fact, "negative capability" becomes the ideal in itself, which, pursued to the most intense extreme, enables Keats to catch a momentary glimpse of eternity.

In Stanza Four, Keats chooses the "viewless wings of Poesy" for his flight, but he still suffers the gravitational pull of his "sole self": "Though the dull brain perplexes and retards." He desires a complete union with the nightingale, but his own sense of identity presses upon him. However, in the very next line Keats' imagination accelerates rapidly, enabling him to empathize completely with the bird ("Already with thee!"), and thus he achieves "negative capability." But, as Keats achieves "negative capability," his imagination does not decelerate or level off. Instead, it takes off on eagle's wings and creates the imaginary "faery lands" of Stanzas Four and Five:

But here there is no light,

Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown

Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
 Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
 But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
 Wherewith the seasonable month endows
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
 White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
 Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
 And mid-May's eldest child,
 The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
 The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

From its identification with the nightingale, Keats' imagination flies up beyond the moon to a weird "faery land" where incense hangs on the boughs of trees and darkness lies embalmed. It is difficult to understand exactly what Keats is trying to accomplish in these two stanzas, but their meaning can be unlocked by examining his images of darkness and blindness. For example, the poet flies on the "viewless wings of Poesy." He first enters a realm of soft, moonlit darkness:

...tender is the night,
 And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
 Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays.

Then his imagination carries him above this world to a realm where "there is no light," where he "cannot see," to a realm

of "embalmed darkness." The point in Stanzas Four and Five is that Keats' imagination is not only working intensely to achieve total "negative capability" (becoming completely at one with the nightingale), but it is also attempting to create a "faery land" into which no meddling self could possibly intrude. And in this imaginative "faery land" the poet runs into trouble--as will soon be seen.

So, in Stanzas Four and Five Keats has achieved "negative capability," but this is not yet enough. It is still necessary to discover how "negative capability" becomes the ideal in the "Ode"; and this task is accomplished by examining the metamorphoses of the nightingale. As has already been noted, the nightingale of Stanza One is simply a nightingale--a bird, and the nightingale of Stanzas Two and Three is a symbol of escape--a vehicle allowing Keats to fly away from his troubles. But, as Keats achieves "negative capability" in Stanzas Four and Five, the nightingale is transformed into a new symbol--a symbol of immortality. And it is only after Keats achieves "negative capability" that he fully realizes the immortal quality of the bird, and, more importantly, his experience of it. It is here that he begins to catch that momentary glance of eternity, and at this point he enters Stanza Six aching for death:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time

I have been half in love with easeful Death,

Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,

To take into the air my quiet breath;
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
 In such an ecstasy!

Although Keats has already achieved "negative capability" upon entering Stanza Six, he is still somewhat conscious of the experience. That he consciously reflects upon the topic of dying proves the point. Thus, his cry for death is simply a cry to surrender his self completely to the ideal of "negative capability"--to cease to exist as a personal identity. By "death," Keats does not mean physical death (he would "cease upon the midnight with no pain"), but death of the conscious self: total "negative capability," which is, in effect, dying into life--a death which would enable him to preserve the ideal, eternal moment forever. (One must remember here that in all of Keats' poetry death carries a dual connotation. It can mean physical death, as it does in the sonnet "When I Have Fears"; or it can mean death of the conscious self, as it does here in the "Ode" and in Hyperion, III, 128-30.) Also, when Keats cries for death, there can be no doubt that he actually feels an assured admittance to heaven. One has only to examine the religious imagery of Stanza Six to prove the point. For example, the nightingale pours forth its "soul" in ecstasy: the bird's soul is immortal and because Keats has joined with it, he

too has experienced eternity. Also, the nightingale's song is a "high requiem," which is, of course, a mass for the souls of the dead. Furthermore, the nightingale actually does symbolize immortality. At the start of Stanza Seven, Keats writes: "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird," and the remainder of the stanza is devoted to elevating the nightingale above time and history:

No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown;
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for
home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.⁶

But despite all his many cries for death, Keats does not die, and the ideal moment of "negative capability" does not last. For just as he is about to surrender his self to

⁶In the earlier ode, "Bards of Passion," Keats also refers to the immortal quality of the nightingale:
Where the nightingale doth sing
Not a senseless, tranced thing,
But divine melodious truth;
Philosophic numbers smooth;
Tales of golden histories
Of heaven and its mysteries.
(11. 17-22)

the nightingale's "high requiem" (to complete "negative capability") at the end of Stanza Six, he remembers the presence of his "sole self": "Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain--/ To thy high requiem become a sod." So, here Keats reaches his climax, and from this point forward he begins his descent to selfhood.

Keats' return to self can best be explained by the metaphor of "waves." At the completion of Stanza Six, Keats is an enormous wave that has reached its peak and must come crashing down, as it well does upon the allusion to "sod." Yet in Stanza Seven, Keats is still absorbed in the experience of the nightingale's immortality and in his own "negative capability," so he ebbs and rises again, this time as a smaller, less powerful wave, which eventually splashes to shore, ebbing no more. It is here that Keats fully realizes the implications of "perilous seas" and "faery lands forlorn": "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell/ To toll me back from thee to my sole self...." And at that, the experience is over, and once again he is only John Keats, listening to a nightingale fly away.

All Keats can do now is reflect upon the nature of his experience; he does not moralize upon or judge it. And so the "Ode to a Nightingale" ends with these puzzling questions: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/ Fled is that music:--Do I wake or sleep?". Now these questions must be answered.

IV

First, to answer Keats' initial query, it was both a vision and a waking dream. It was a vision in that it enabled him to attain a momentary glimpse of eternity. And it was a waking dream for the same reason: what seemed like a dream actually awoke him to a glance at the infinite. As to the question "Do I wake or sleep?", one must conclude that to his corporeal, "sole self" he awakes--he returns to consciousness. But to the ideal immortal heights of "negative capability," he sleeps. Instead of being "teased out of thought," as he was in the "Ode," he is teased into thought, and there the "Ode" must close.

But, after answering Keats' own questions, it is still necessary to discover why he could not sustain the ideal moment of "negative capability." And the answer to this question lies in something other than "negative capability." The great problem or difficulty for Keats in the "Ode" was not the achieving of "negative capability," but rather the excessive use of an inordinate imagination (i.e., the imaginative "faery lands" of Stanzas Four and Five). Though the imagination was essential to Keats in attaining empathy (being required to imagine himself as the nightingale), the imagination in excess was frightening to

him.⁷ He was not, after all, in pursuit of the apocalypse; he was certainly not Blake. The imagination in the "Ode to a Nightingale" simply carried Keats too far from earth. One must remember that he was originally inspired to compose the "Ode" because of the sensations that he received upon observing a breathing, singing nightingale (cf. Brown's account). And this incident of inspiration gives a true insight into Keats' actual character. He was a person firmly rooted in the senses and the earth: "O for a Life of Sensations rather

⁷Despite Keats' comment on the truth of the imagination (Letters, I, 184-85), he was often troubled by its function. In his "Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds," he wrote:

Or is it that imagination brought
Beyond its proper bound, yet still confin'd
Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind,
Cannot refer to any standard law
Of either earth or heaven? It is a flaw
In happiness, to see beyond our bourn,--
It forces us in summer skies to mourn,
It spoils the singing of the Nightingale.

Also, Walter Evert, in Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), makes a comment similar to mine on Keats' fear of the inordinate imagination: "But, where the initial trend of argument culminates in an attempt to place the blame on the external world's increasing tendency to intrude on the imagination's capacity for idealization, Keats' unflinching determination to have it out, once and for all, carried him past a tentative resolution, in which he merely accepted the malfunctioning of his own imagination, to a final resolution in which, with reluctance and pain, he recognized what a grossly distorting glass the unfettered imagination can become" (p. 211).

Finally, Keats himself was tolled back to his "sole self" at the end of Stanza Seven in the "Ode" by the remembrance of the "faery lands forlorn"--those lands created in Stanzas Four and Five by his own imagination.

than of Thoughts....," he once wrote.⁸ And when his imagination left the earth behind, it often left Keats in trouble. The point is that "negative capability" is not achieved through a rampant or inordinate imagination, but through indifference, selflessness, and empathic-identification with the external world. Keats achieved "negative capability" in the "Ode" not by flying away from himself, but by absorbing himself intensely in the nightingale. But Keats did not understand this fact. His sensitive and sensual character did not teach him that the ideal of "negative capability" is achieved primarily through the senses--that the invisible is manifested in the visible. Keats' senses only brought on thoughts of his "sole self," and thus they acted as a gravitational pull which kept reminding him of his mortality.⁹ And since Keats continually suffered this conflict between the ideal and reality, between the imagination and sense perceptions, he was allowed only an occasional glimpse at

⁸Letters, I, 185.

⁹Keats states this conflict plainly in "Sleep and Poetry":

The visions all are fled--the car is fled
 Into the light of heaven, and in their stead
 A sense of real things comes doubly strong,
 And, like a muddy stream, would bear along
 My soul to nothingness,

(ll. 155-59)

and again in "God of the Meridian":

God of the Meridian,
 And of the East and West,
 To thee my soul is flown,
 And my body is earthward press'd.

(ll. 1-4)

eternity; and this is why the "Ode to a Nightingale" must end as it does.

V

This conflict between the ideal and reality posed a dilemma which troubled Keats all his short life. As the introductory chapter demonstrated, "negative capability" was a speculation which greatly appealed to Keats' highest ideals but conflicted with his personality. And this conflict, which is evident in much of Keats' poetry, was to find a resolution only once in Keats' greatest poem, Hyperion, which will be discussed next.

Chapter 3: Hyperion

In Hyperion¹ Keats borrowed a classical Greek myth and redacted it to his own purposes. The poem depicts the fall of the Titans and the deification of Apollo. As with many of Keats' poems, much has been written about the meaning of Hyperion, but it is usually interpreted as a statement by Keats on the process of creative evolution. This interpretation of the poem is sound, but it is not of direct concern here. Instead, this discussion will deal with "negative capability" and how it relates to the process of creative evolution. For example, in Hyperion the Titans fail to function with "negative capability" by refusing to accept creative evolution; and Apollo rises to divinity, not primarily through creative evolution, but

¹This discussion of Hyperion appears after the chapter on the "Ode to a Nightingale" even though the chronological order is incorrect, Hyperion having been completed slightly earlier than the "Ode." However, despite several notable attempts to trace an evolution or development in Keats' poetry and thought (e.g., C. D. Thorpe's The Mind of John Keats and C. L. Finney's The Evolution of Keats' Poetry), I can find little reason to discuss Keats' poems chronologically. His most "mature" ideas are evident in his earliest and most "immature" poetry. Also, Keats' creative life was compacted into such a short period of time that he could not possibly have evolved a system of poetry or thought--nor was it his nature to do so. Keats' mind was always like a pack of scattered cards (his letters being a testimony to the fact). Thus a strict chronology is not entirely necessary in a study of his poetry or thought.

because he achieves the ideal of "negative capability." The point is that "negative capability" is a primary theme in Hyperion, commensurate with the theme of creative evolution; and, at least in the case of Apollo, is Keats' most powerful statement on "negative capability" as an ideal--a point mentioned briefly at the end of the last chapter.

This chapter will, first, examine the Titans as a group and then individually to discover the reason for their fall and the extent to which they function with "negative capability" after they have fallen; second, focus on Apollo and discuss him as the supreme example of "negative capability"; and third, offer an interpretation of Hyperion, in terms of "negative capability," as the "perfect" fragment.

II

Hyperion is a poem about the fall of the Titans and the reason for that fall. Keats says, through the character of Oceanus, that the Titans fall because of "Nature's law"--the process of creative evolution. They were not the first to fall; they will not be the last. They were superior to their predecessors; the Olympians are superior to them; their fall is merely a part of nature's law of creative evolution. Oceanus gives the most basic reason for the Titans' fall. But there are other reasons why the Titans appear so pathetic and earth-shattered, why Keats presents them as such

miserable, death-like figures, not even shades of the gods they once were and still are, even though they are fallen. And these other reasons are found in "negative capability." First, Keats says that the Titans are all "self-hid, or prison-bound." Simply said, they are so absorbed in their sorrows and troubles that they are actually prisoners of their selves and not of Tartarus. After all, they are still gods. Second, as Coelus says later, the Titans are not acting like gods. This also means that they are failing to act with "negative capability." Instead of being selfless and godly in their actions, they are sad and spiteful. In short, they are acting like a brood of selfish children. They cannot transcend their lower identities or personal selves, and thus they must suffer. So, though creative evolution or "Nature's law" is the most basic reason for the Titans' fall, the reason they appear as they do is that they fail to function with "negative capability" in accepting their lot.

Now the main Titans will be examined individually to discover the extent to which each possesses or lacks "negative capability." Saturn enters at the beginning of Book I:

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale

Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,

Far from the fiery noon, and the eve's one star,

Sat gray-hair'd Saturn. (I, 1-4)

The imagery which surrounds the fallen god is silent, dark, and dead. Saturn is

...quiet as a stone,
 Still as the silence round about his lair;
 Forest on forest hung about his head
 Like cloud on cloud. No stir of air was there,
 Not so much life as on a summer's day
 Robs not one light seed from the feather'd grass,
 But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest.

(I, 4-10)

This is the state of the king of the Titans after the fall.
 And as he is awakened by Thea, the spouse of Hyperion, he
 can only reply:

O tender spouse of gold Hyperion,
 Thea, I feel thee ere I see thy face;
 Look up, and let me see our doom in it;
 Look up, and tell me if this feeble shape
 Is Saturn's; tell me, if thou hear'st the voice
 Of Saturn; tell me, if this wrinkling brow,
 Naked and bare of its great diadem,
 Peers like the front of Saturn. Who had power
 To make me desolate? whence came the strength?
 How was it nurtur'd to such bursting forth,
 While Fate seem'd strangled in my nervous grasp?
 But it is so; and I am smother'd up,
 And buried from all godlike exercise
 Of influence benign on planets pale,
 Of admonitions to the winds and seas,

Of peaceful sway above man's harvesting,
 And all those acts which Deity supreme
 Doth ease its heart of love in. (I, 95-112)

Saturn's speech is indeed poignant, but in the main it is sophistic and rhetorical. Saturn feels as if he is dead and buried, but he is actually blind to the reason for his fall. And Keats adds a special irony to Saturn's ignorance by including the actual reason for his miserable condition in the god's own words:

...I am gone
 Away from my own bosom: I have left
 My strong identity, my real self,
 Somewhere between the throne, and where I sit
 Here on this spot of earth. (I, 112-16)

The question is what is the "strong identity" and "real self" that Saturn speaks of? And the answer is that strong-minded, "sole self" by which he ruled and which blinded him to the inevitability of his fall. The point in this passage is that Saturn misconstrues the meanings of "strong identity" and "real self," and this is where the irony occurs. For Keats, the "strong identity" would be no identity at all, and the "real self" would be selfless. But Saturn interprets his "strong identity" and "real self" as his personal force, and he believes that the restoration of his assertive ego would restore his throne:

...Saturn must be King.

Yes, there must be a golden victory;

There must be Gods thrown down. (I, 125-27)

Thus Saturn is blind to his faults and to the reason for his fall.

However, there is an interesting twist to Saturn's words in that they can be interpreted, almost convincingly, exactly opposite the explanation mentioned above. When Saturn says,

...I am gone

Away from my own bosom: I have left

My strong identity, my real self,

Somewhere between the throne, and where I sit

Here on this spot of earth, (I, 112-16)

one may receive the impression that he is aware of what has occurred and is searching for a real solution to his dilemma. He may realize that his "real self" has been defeated and be on his way to realizing "negative capability" when he cries: "Thea! Thea! Thea! where is Saturn?" (I, 134). This interpretation of Saturn's speech is more sympathetic to the god, but it is probably not valid. As Keats says soon after, all of the Titans (including Saturn) were "self-hid, or prison bound." As stated earlier, they were all prisoners of their selves and lacked the ability to understand or accept their fall.

As Thea leads Saturn to the realm of the other fallen Titans, it is evident that, as sad and pathetic as he is,

he is actually no better than any of the others. In ultimate despair he cries:

...Not in my own sad breast,
Which is its own great judge and searcher out,
Can I find reason why ye should be thus.

(II, 129-31)

This final speech ends Saturn's role in the poem; and, after examining his character, one must conclude that he is simply ignorant of the cause of his fall, that he is confused about the nature of his "strong identity" and "real self," and that, like the rest of the Titans, he is incapable of "negative capability."

After Saturn concludes his speech, the official council of the Titans commences, and this leads to a discussion of Oceanus. In Oceanus one finds the doctrine of creative evolution by which Hyperion is most often interpreted. Since his philosophy has already been partially discussed, only the most essential elements of his speech will be quoted. Within the context of his long tirade, Oceanus says:

We fall by course of Nature's law, not force
Of thunder, or of Jove....
And first, as thou wast not the first of powers,
So art thou not the last; it cannot be:
Thou art not the beginning nor the end....
So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,

A power more strong in beauty, born of us
 And fated to excel us, as we pass
 In glory that old Darkness...

for 'tis the eternal law
 That first in beauty should be first in might:
 Yea by that law, another race may drive
 Our conquerors to mourn as we do now....
 Receive the truth, and let it be your balm.

(II, 181-243)

What Oceanus says is true (that the Olympians succeed the Titans proves his point); but the tenor of his speech sounds somehow cold, without any real feeling or conviction. One could do well to wonder why Keats calls him a "Sophist." It seems that, although Oceanus speaks the truth, he does not actually sense the reality of it or understand its many complexities. He is thoroughly "consequitive," and the truth he speaks is of that sort. In other words, Oceanus uncovers the most basic reason for the Titans' fall, but he offers no solution to assuage their grief other than the satisfaction they may receive in a subtle revenge:

...for 'tis the eternal law
 That first in beauty should be first in might:
 Yea by that law, another race may drive
 Our conquerors to mourn as we do now....
 Receive the truth, and let it be your balm.

(II, 228-43)

The point is that Oceanus has less insight into the workings of "negative capability" than Saturn. He does not realize that acting with "negative capability," in spite of his fall, would make that fall a less painful experience and actually make him more of a god. In short, if all of the Titans acted with "negative capability," their fall would be less tragic and their inhabitancy of Tartarus more a graceful retirement than an imprisonment in hell.

Moreover, one can sense the cold, flat quality of Oceanus' speech by contrasting it with the speech of Clymene, which follows his. Clymene, who has already experienced the coming of Apollo, cries:

I stood upon a shore, a pleasant shore,
Where a sweet clime was breathed from a land
Of fragrance, quietness, and trees, and flowers.
Full of calm joy it was, as I of grief;
Too full of joy and soft delicious warmth;
So that I felt a movement in my heart
To chide, and to reproach that solitude
With songs of misery, music of our woes;
And sat me down, and took a mouthed shell
And murmur'd into it, and made melody--
O melody no more! for while I sang,
And with poor skill let pass into the breeze
The dull shell's echo, from a bowery strand
Just opposite, an island of the sea,

There came enchantment with the shifting wind,
 That did both drown and keep alive my ears.
 I threw my shell away upon the sand,
 And a wave fill'd it, as my sense was fill'd
 With that new blissful golden melody.
 A living death was in each gush of sounds,
 Each family of rapturous hurried notes,
 That fell, one after one, yet all at once,
 Like pearl beads dropping sudden from their string:
 And then another, then another strain,
 Each like a dove leaving its olive perch,
 With music wing'd instead of silent plumes,
 To hover round my head, and make me sick
 Of joy and grief at once. Grief overcame,
 And I was stopping up my frantic ears,
 When, past all hindrance of my trembling hands,
 A voice came sweeter, sweeter than all tune,
 And still it cried, "Apollo! young Apollo!"

(II, 262-93)

In her speech, Clymene sings, listens to the melody of a
 shell, and is captivated by the "tune of Apollo." In short,
 she brings to Hyperion something which has been heretofore
 lacking--music, feeling and life. True, it may be argued
 that Clymene, like all the rest of the Titans, can only
 express woe:

O father, I am here the simplest voice,

And all my knowledge is that joy is gone,
 And this thing woe crept in among our hearts,
 There to remain for ever, as I fear. (II, 252-55)

But she alone of the Titans can also experience joy. And more importantly, she experiences joy and grief together:

With music wing'd instead of silent plumes,
 To hover round my head, and make me sick
 Of joy and grief at once. (II, 287-89)

She can grasp the two emotions as one without separating them, and her ability to do so creates in her a certain "negative capability." She is able to experience the mystery of Apollo's coming with a sense of discovery and wonder (not defeat), and she does not cry after reason or fact. Also, Clymene's speech is the first real burst of emotion in Hyperion, which is truly a breath of fresh air in an already stifling atmosphere. Whereas the Titans are like a stagnant pond, Clymene is like a bubbling spring, gurgling over with emotion. Thus she brings new feeling and life to the poem; and, because of her "negative capability," she becomes more godlike than Oceanus or even Saturn.

At the completion of Clymene's speech, Keats has the perfect opportunity to introduce Apollo. But, instead of utilizing Clymene's exuberance as a fitting introduction, Keats chooses rather to create a greater contrast for Apollo's entrance. So next one encounters the "overwhelming voice of huge Enceladus," the most blatant and belligerent

Titan. Enceladus cries:

Speak! roar! shout! yell! ye sleepy Titans all.
 Do ye forget the blows, the buffets vile?
 Are ye not smitten by a youngling arm?
 Dost thou forget, sham Monarch of the Waves,
 Thy scalding in the seas? What, have I rous'd
 Your spleens with so few simple words as these?
 O joy! for now I see ye are not lost:
 O joy! for now I see a thousand eyes
 Wide-glaring for revenge! (II, 316-24)

From the context of his speech, it is obvious that he is simply a cruel and immature child who, after being defeated, can react only by striking back. It is useless even to speak of "negative capability" with Enceladus. He is so far removed from it that the contrast is black and white.

After Enceladus completes his speech, the council of the Titans is over, and this discussion must turn to Hyperion. If Enceladus can be thought of as a cruel child, Hyperion can be thought of as a comic child. Of all the Titans, Hyperion alone is still unfallen. Thus he is placed in the embarrassing predicament of having to decide just what to do. He knows he is destined to fall, but he is still unfallen. So he enters in Book I in his flaming magnificence, pacing about on the verge of a temper tantrum, awaiting his doom:

And so, when harbour'd in the sleepy west,
 After the full completion of fair day,--

For rest divine upon exalted couch
 And slumber in the arms of melody,
 He pac'd away the pleasant hours of ease
 With stride colossal, on from hall to hall;
 While far within each aisle and deep recess,
 His winged minions in close clusters stood,
 Amaz'd and full of fear. (I, 190-98)

Hyperion's situation is important in that his decision will determine what he is to achieve (as with Keats in the "Ode to a Nightingale"). If he acts with "negative capability," he may retain his dignity and godliness; but if he is brazen and revengeful, he will become like Enceladus.

It is here, at the brink of Hyperion's dilemma, that Coelus, the father of the Titans, enters to comfort and advise his son. Coelus says:

Yet do thou strive; as thou art capable,
 As thou canst move about, an evident God;
 And canst oppose to each malignant hour
 Ethereal presence...

yea, seize the arrow's barb
 Before the tense string murmur.--To the earth!
 For there thou wilt find Saturn, and his woes.

(I, 337-46)

On the surface, Coelus seems to advise Hyperion to take up arms and fight for revenge. But there may be a subtler and deeper meaning to his words. Coelus, like Hyperion, is a

somewhat comic figure; only Coelus administers the joke and is not the butt of it. In appraising Coelus, one must remember that, like the Titans, he too was once defeated and suffered their fate. But one must not forget that Coelus has had eons of time to learn wisdom and that he has assimilated his old self into an ethereal voice: "...I am but a voice;/ My life is but the life of winds and tides" (I, 340-41). He no longer has a strong identity, but he seems to have acquired "negative capability." So, perhaps Coelus' advice to Hyperion is just a joke; perhaps he can now savor the revenge that Oceanus speaks of. But perhaps Hyperion misconstrues his father. After all, Coelus is rather ambiguous. When he says,

For I have seen my sons most unlike Gods.
 Divine ye were created, and divine
 In sad demeanour, solemn, undisturb'd,
 Unruffled, like high Gods, ye liv'd and ruled;
 Now I behold in you fear, hope, and wrath;
 Actions of rage and passion; even as
 I see them, on the mortal world beneath,
 In men who die.--This is the grief, O Son!
 Sad sign of ruin, sudden dismay, and fall,

(I, 328-36)

he may be scolding the Titans for acting so childishly and immaturely. Perhaps he is hinting that they should practice "negative capability," act more godlike, and preserve their

godliness despite "Nature's law." In any event, Hyperion chooses to fight. And he leaves his throne at the end of Book I to enter again at the end of Book II as the Titans' last hope. He is a rather comic-tragic figure--a sort of black humor personified.

III

With the entrance of Hyperion at the end of Book II, the stage is prepared for the entrance of Apollo in Book III; the contrast is complete. And Book III is, indeed, a book of contrasts. For example, Keats contrasts the dark and death-like imagery of Books I and II to the light and melodious imagery of this opening passage of Book III:

Leave them, O Muse! for thou anon wilt find
Many a fallen old Divinity
Wandering in vain about bewildered shores.
Meantime touch piously the Delphic harp,
And not a wind of heaven but will breathe
In aid soft warble from the Dorian flute;
For lo! 'tis for the Father of all verse.
Flush every thing that hath a vermeil hue,
Let the rose glow intense and warm the air,
And let the clouds of even and of morn
Float in voluptuous fleeces o'er the hills;
Let the red wine within the goblet boil,

Cold as a bubbling well; let faint-lipp'd shells,
 On sands, or in great deeps, vermilion turn
 Through all their labyrinths; and let the maid
 Blush keenly, as with some warm kiss surpris'd.
 Chief isle of the embowered Cyclades,
 Rejoice, O Delos, with thine olives green,
 And poplars, and lawn-shading palms, and beech,
 In which the Zephyr breathes the loudest song,
 And hazels thick, dark-stemm'd beneath the shade:
 Apollo is once more the golden theme! (III, 7-28)

This passage is reminiscent of Clymene's speech, but quite unlike anything written about the Titans. Also, Keats contrasts Apollo's first appearance to that of Saturn. Instead of being "deep in the shady sadness of a vale," one finds Apollo as

...he left his mother fair
 And his twin-sister sleeping in their bower,
 And in the morning twilight wandered forth
 Beside the osiers of a rivulet,
 Full ankle-deep in lilies of the vale.
 The nightingale had ceas'd, and a few stars
 Were lingering in the heavens, while the thrush
 Began calm-throated. Throughout all the isle
 There was no covert, no retired cave
 Unhaunted by the murmurous noise of waves,
 Though scarcely heard in many a green recess.

He listen'd, and he wept, and his bright tears
Went trickling down the golden bow he held.

(III, 31-43)

Again, the imagery is light and moving. Thus, at the start of Book III, Keats not only contrasts Apollo to the Titans, but also creates a proper setting for his deification.

Apollo, as he first appears, is an unusual, effeminate sort of character. He is bewildered and confused; he seems rather formless, without much of an identity. Though he and the rest of the Olympians have succeeded the Titans by "Nature's law," Apollo is still not a god. At this point he encounters Mnemosyne and his deification begins. Mnemosyne, like Apollo, is an ambiguous character. In the context in which Keats places her, she is a symbol of memory, intuition, and knowledge. Within her being are contained the mysteries of the universe, and in her Apollo must realize what godhood is. Now, as Apollo meets Mnemosyne, one can see how different he is from all of the Titans; how cold and logical and spiteful they all were; how none could function with "negative capability"; and how beautiful and fluid the new god is; how selfless and empathic and totally understanding. As Apollo gazes into Mnemosyne's eyes, he immediately knows her name--intuitively: "...Mnemosyne! Thy name is on my tongue, I know not how" (III, 82-83). After seeing Mnemosyne, he feels such love and empathy that he literally grows selfless and dissolves into everything he views:

What are the stars? There is the sun, the sun!
 And the most patient brilliance of the moon!
 And stars by thousands! Point me out the way
 To any one particular beauteous star,
 And I will flit into it with my lyre.
 And make its silvery splendour pant with bliss.

(III, 97-103)

Apollo, in achieving these first two stages of "negative capability," so transcends himself that he rises to a universal perspective where he virtually becomes one with the world and knows all. He cries to Mnemosyne:

Mute thou remainest--mute! yet I can read
 A wondrous lesson in thy silent face:
 Knowledge enormous makes a God of me.
 Names, deeds, grey legends, dire events, rebellions,
 Majesties, sovran voices, agonies,
 Creations and destroyings, all at once
 Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,
 And deify me, as if some blithe wine
 Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk,
 And so become immortal. (III, 111-20)

It is at this stage that total "negative capability" is achieved. Apollo gives up his self completely, and he literally "dies into life." He becomes a god, and then the poem breaks off.

Apollo is quite unlike any character Keats had ever

created before. He is similar to Endymion in that both attain immortality, but there is a world of difference between them. Keats himself said: "...the Hero of the written tale being mortal is led on, like Buonaparte, by circumstance; whereas Apollo in Hyperion being a fore-seeing God will shape his actions like one."² Apollo is a true god, and his "negative capability" is complete. As mentioned earlier, Apollo was Keats' most powerful statement on "negative capability" as an ideal, and the only resolution to the conflict which he suffered between the ideal and reality. But even this resolution may be questioned because the poem is a fragment and supposedly incomplete. And this now leads to a discussion of Hyperion as a "perfect" fragment.

IV

It is true that Hyperion is a fragment. Keats had long and elaborate plans for an epic many times the size of the poem he left behind. But the fact that Hyperion is a fragment does not exclude the possibility that the poem is complete and, indeed, a "perfect" fragment. And if the ending of the poem is discussed in terms of "negative capability," one can see how complete and perfect the fragment actually is and why Keats was wise to break off when he did.

²Letters, I, 207.

As was seen in the "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats achieved the pinnacle of "negative capability" (an experience almost identical to Apollo's deification), but he could not sustain the ideal moment. He caught a momentary glimpse of immortality and was then tolled back to his mortal abode--his "sole self." As has already been suggested, this conflict between the ideal and reality, which Keats suffered in the "Ode" and all his short life, was resolved only once, in Apollo--and this is the point. In Hyperion Apollo achieves the same zenith of "negative capability" that Keats achieved in the "Ode"; but Apollo is a god, not a mortal who became immortal like Endymion, but a true god with no mortal chains to stifle and restrain him or to pull him back to earth. In short, Apollo achieved what Keats ideally would have liked to achieve in the "Ode." Furthermore, after Apollo became deified through his "negative capability," Keats could necessarily go no further. Apollo had done it all. His "negative capability" was so complete that he actually became "Nature's law." Thus, by breaking the poem off at this exact moment, Keats did not leave Apollo incomplete, but rather preserved for him the ideal, immortal moment of "negative capability" forever--like the figures on the Grecian urn.

Also, had Keats continued Hyperion, one must ask what he would have done with Apollo. And the answer to this question is found, again, in the words of Oceanus:

And first, as thou wast not the first of powers,
 So art thou not the last; it cannot be:
 Thou art not the beginning nor the end....

for 'tis the eternal law

That first in beauty should be first in might:

Yea by that law, another race may drive

Our conquerors to mourn as we do now. (II, 188-231)

Apollo would eventually be placed in the same situation as the Titans (another cycle in the process of creative evolution), and the poem would spiral out and on forever, a continuous rehashing of the same theme. To avoid this problem, or perhaps because of it, Keats broke off and Hyperion ends as it does, a "perfect" fragment with Apollo as a god--complete.

V

Before leaving Hyperion, it is necessary to digress briefly to clarify one aspect of what has been discussed thus far. As the introductory chapter demonstrated, for Keats, "negative capability" was a speculation on both a style and ideal of life. But the last two chapters have dealt primarily with two characters involved in the ideal aspect of the concept, Keats in the "Ode to a Nightingale" and Apollo in Hyperion. However, "negative capability" was important to Keats as a style of life as well as an ideal,

and one should not forget this fact. The Titans, for example, were characters who did not possess "negative capability," and their lives established a sort of negative standard and a warning of the consequences suffered by those who fail to function with "negative capability."

The following discussion of Lamia will focus primarily upon this aspect of "negative capability" as a style of life.

Chapter 4: Lamia

Perhaps the least understood of all of Keats' poems is Lamia, a work which has received more varied and unsatisfactory interpretations than even the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Following are a few of the ways in which Lamia has been construed: (1) as a Romantic poet's condemnation of science and philosophy; (2) as a Romantic poet's quest for the beautiful; (3) as an extended discussion of the "la belle dame sans merci" theme; (4) as a sensual seduction narrative; and (5) as an ambivalent statement on illusion and reality. Each of these interpretations contains a certain grain of truth, but none explains Lamia satisfactorily; all leave the reader feeling flat, as if the critic had neatly circumscribed the poem without ever penetrating its center.

In this chapter, Lamia will be explained in terms of "negative capability," and specifically in terms of the consequences the individual suffers if he fails to function with "negative capability." Such an interpretation may only add another link in the long chain of unsatisfactory interpretations, but hopefully it will do more. It may not be the ultimate exegesis, but it will shed some new light on the poem, bringing it into an entirely new perspective.

To do earlier critics justice, this chapter should recapitulate all previous interpretations of Lamia, discuss,

accept, or reject them (whatever the case may be), before proceeding to a new interpretation. Such a procedure would be a long and tiresome affair and not entirely necessary. However, so as not to neglect all earlier critics, this chapter will briefly discuss Lamia as a sensual seduction narrative (an interpretation especially unfair to Keats) and as an ambivalent statement on illusion and reality (an interpretation which comes closest to the crux of the poem). These brief discussions will serve the triple purpose of paying lip service to earlier critics, creating an opportunity to defend Lamia, and offering a good introduction to "negative capability" as it exists within the poem.

II

To read Lamia as a sensual seduction narrative is to read it at the most basic level. Such a reading is unfair to Keats. It assumes that he had nothing else in mind when writing the poem, or that his mind could function only at the surface level. This interpretation is not only unfair, but is for the most part untrue. Granted, Keats was not especially kind to women. He writes: "...the generallity of women... appear to me as children to whom I would rather give a Sugar Plum than my time."¹ And at the time of Lamia's composition,

¹Letters, I, 404.

he was having problems with a Lamia of his own--Fanny Brawne. But these two minor examples were not sufficient reason to prompt Keats to write Lamia as a mere seduction narrative. Keats accomplished more in his poem, and a closer examination of the text will reveal the fallacies of the seduction interpretation.

Keats does not dwell on the fact that Lamia is a snake woman. In fact, he does not dwell on the fact that she is a snake, except at the beginning and end of the poem. One must remember that, when Lamia shrieks, she is transformed into a woman--and a woman in love at that. Keats describes her as a "lovely graduate" from "Cupid's college" (I, 197-98). So Lamia must be evaluated not as a seducing snake, but as a woman in love. This is the main role she plays in the poem, and this is probably how Keats wished her to be construed. If Lamia is viewed from this perspective, the theme of seduction takes on a different meaning. Lamia does not want to seduce Lycius for purely sensual or evil reasons. She desires to make him love her, and she employs her wiles solely to this end, which cannot be called seduction in the rapacious sense. Lamia desires Lycius' love, and the results of her "seduction" for love will be examined in a later discussion.

As has already been suggested, it is valid to interpret Lamia as a poem about illusion and reality; it seems obvious that Keats had this theme in mind while writing the

poem. At the beginning of Lamia, referring to Hermes and his nymph, Keats says: "Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass/ Their pleasures in a long immortal dream" (I, 126-28). Although this statement is concerned with immortals, it implies that the dreams of mortals do not come true; and, further, that if Lycius (a mortal) should fall in love with Lamia (a woman but an immortal in essence), his love for her would be only a dream or an illusion. Keats writes a similar warning in Endymion:

There never liv'd a mortal man, who bent
His appetite beyond his natural sphere,
But starv'd and died. (IV, 646-48)

So Lamia's love for Lycius, like his for her, is ill-fated from the start. Lamia cannot successfully love a mortal because of her immortal nature, and Lycius' love for Lamia will result in illusion. But this disparity in backgrounds and natures is not the only reason for the failure of their relationship, as will be discovered later.

In direct opposition to the presentation of illusion that is found in Lycius and Lamia, one finds in Apollonius the embodiment of empirical reality. It is generally agreed that he represents what Keats would call a "consequitive man," one who is always reasoning after knowledge and answers to "knotty problems." Apollonius is a philosopher--a sophist--and Keats opposed that sort of man. In the form of Apollonius, reality becomes a destructive force in Lamia.

Apollonius may see through Lamia's illusion; but, because of his piercing reality, the lovers must die. He offers no alternative to illusion except a spleenful sense of reason which destroys rather than creates.

So Keats presented the topics of illusion and reality in Lamia, but he did not support either one. Lamia and Lycius are the victims of ill-fated illusions; and Apollonius, representing reality, destroys the lovers with his sophistic and "consequitive" reasoning. Some critics have concluded that Keats drew an ambivalent picture of illusion and reality and left it at that. But the poem can be taken one step further to prove that Lamia is not an ambivalent statement on illusion and reality, or a sensual seduction narrative, but rather a dramatic presentation of the consequences suffered by those characters who fail to function with "negative capability."

III

The key word in discovering how Lamia is a poem about "negative capability" is "ambivalence." Instead of offering a clear-cut alternative to the problem of illusion and reality, Keats offers no alternative of any sort, and this is how "negative capability" enters the poem. Ambivalence means mixed emotions, conflicting feelings of revulsion and attraction, pleasure and pain. When one is ambivalent, he has no

set response or solution to whatever he is ambivalent about. This is why Keats does not favor Lycius and Lamia over Apollonius, or Apollonius over them, and this is exactly what he means when he defines "negative capability":

"...when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." And as has already been noted, "negative capability" further implies that one should be capable of negating one's self or losing one's personal identity, often empathically in another object or being. In doing so, the individual transcends his lower, "sole self" to a higher self (a non-self) which is disinterested, not obsessed with personal interests, and can function without questions or answer (ambivalently) in a climate of doubt. Within the context of this definition, Keats presents the three characters of his poem as limited individuals who are incapable of functioning with "negative capability." Each of these characters is concerned with knowledge, clarity, identity, passions, and personal interests; and all are obsessed with self. Keats portrays the deaths of Lycius and Lamia and the spleenful, "consecutive" life of Apollonius, who destroys the lovers, as warning examples of the consequences that one must suffer when he fails to function with "negative capability." These three characters will be examined in depth to prove the point.

IV

As has already been noted, Lamia must not be treated as an evil seductress but as a woman in love. Love is a most important aspect of Lamia and a topic which must be examined to understand properly her character and function in the poem. Keats uses the word "love" constantly when describing Lamia. For instance, Lamia speaks to Hermes for "Love's sake" (I, 65). She protects the fair nymph from the lustful "love-glances" (I, 102) of the earthy Satyrs and Fauns. She tells Hermes: "I love a youth of Corinth" (I, 119), and Keats says that "of love" she was "deep learned to the red heart's core" (I, 190). If Lamia is examined in this light, the evil seduction theme may be dismissed, and one sees her "seducing" only for love.

Lamia is a symbol of love, pure pleasure and joy, without pain; and this is her flaw. To function with "negative capability," one must necessarily see "joy with her neighbor pain." Nothing in life is perfect; even the most beautiful woman must age and decay. This theme of seeing the marriage of joy and pain is essential to Keats' poetry. The "Ode on Melancholy" is the prime example. Melancholy dwells with beauty, "Beauty that must die." In understanding this axiom, one gains a greater insight into the mystery of life, which consists of contradictions, doubts, and change. But again,

Lamia is a symbol of pure pleasure--without pain. After she has been transformed into a woman, there is nothing of her old self remaining: "Nothing but pain and ugliness were left" (I, 164). The new woman is perfectly beautiful: "A full-born beauty new and exquisite" (I, 172). Lamia is only one side of the sphere. She is not a complete woman, for she will have nothing else but love. Keats says she would "unperplex bliss from its neighbor pain" (I, 192). Lamia would separate the spectrum and remove the mystery from life, and this is why she cannot function with "negative capability."

Lamia then proceeds to seduce Lycius by casting a spell on him, and he instantly falls in love with her. By enchanting Lycius, she conscripts him to her camp of love. She selfishly steals any worldly thought or concern from his mind, and she appears gloating--a selfish, loving elf.

But Lamia makes the mistake of being too selfish. She grows "coy" and teases Lycius:

What canst thou say or do of charm enough
 To dull the nice remembrance of my home?
 Thou canst not ask me with thee here to roam
 Over these hills and vales, where no joy is,--
 Empty of immortality and bliss! (I, 274-78)

But Lamia's selfish requests frighten Lycius, who is already sick with love, and she must resort to other tactics to "clear his soul of doubt" (I, 305). There must be no doubt in her love. Lamia, being unfit to live in mystery, must

create a bower of bliss free of pain for pleasure's sake.

Keats writes:

Thus gentle Lamia judg'd, and judg'd aright,
That Lycius could not love in half a fright,
So threw the goddess off, and won his heart
More pleasantly by playing a woman's part.

(I, 334-37)

But one must remember that she is not only playing the part of a woman; she is a woman, a woman in love:

For that she was a woman, and without
Any more subtle fluid in her veins
Than throbbing blood, and that the self-same pains
Inhabited her frail-strung heart as his.

(I, 306-09)

Lamia, then, is not an evil seductress, but a woman so in love that she is willing to transform her immortal self into a real woman and compromise herself by permitting Lycius to take her home to Corinth. Lamia's selfish desire to possess Lycius forecasts her doom. By being "coy," she pushes her lover too far; and to atone for her mistake, she must play love's game on Lycius' home field, which will eventually destroy her. In all the preceding examples, Lamia definitely fails to function with "negative capability." All her actions are self-motivated and intrinsically destructive.

But here it is necessary to digress briefly to defend Lamia. Lamia gives one an unusual impression. Instead of

being repulsed by the fact that she is a snake woman, one feels an odd sense of pity for her. This results from Keats' portrayal of her as a woman hopelessly in love for the majority of the poem. Lamia, an immortal, utterly compromises herself for Lycius' sake. She permits him to take her to Corinth to live among mortals; and although she protests when he wants to marry her and display his goddess in a chariot, she permits him to have his way because she loves him. Such devotion is not seduction, and such devotion at the risk of death merits some pity. Whether he consciously realized it, Keats presented a rather sad and pathetic picture of Lamia, the snake woman.

V

The character of Lycius makes for an interesting study. He is introduced as he returns from Cenchreas. He is "thoughtless at first...his phantasy was lost, where reason fades...passing, in indifference...shut up in mysteries" (I, 234-41). In short, Lycius appears to be in a very receptive state, the state of mind necessary to function with "negative capability." This is the same state of mind Keats was in when he wrote the "Ode on Indolence." Then Lycius is seduced by Lamia. Enchanted by her beauty, he immediately succumbs to love. Lycius does not, however, transcend himself in Lamia. He is intoxicated, confounded,

and confused by her illusion. Keats says he was "blinded... so in her comprized" (I, 347). But as the lovers pass through the city limits of Corinth, it appears that Lamia's illusion will not last long.

In the opening stanza of Part Two of Lamia, Keats presents this wonderful parody of domestic affairs:

Love in a hut, with water and crust,
Is--Love, forgive us!--cinders, ashes, dust;
Love in a palace is perhaps at last
More grievous torment than a hermit's fast.

(II, 1-4)

Keats implies that if Lamia is contained in a mortal environment, she must necessarily die. Since she is placed in an alien element (reality), and not in an ethereal setting, she cannot assert her self or her love over Lycius. Lamia's compromise has already forecast her destruction, and it introduces the change which is about to occur in Lycius.

Lycius, at home in Corinth, cannot remain under Lamia's spell, so he awakes from the illusion and returns to his own identity. The imagery used here is similar to that of the "Ode to a Nightingale." When Keats, in the "Ode," is jolted back to his "sole self" from the nightingale, he returns by the sound of a bell in the word "forlorn": "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell/ To toll me back from thee to my sole self." In Lamia, the "swallow's twitter" (Lamia's illusion) is deafened by the "thrill/ Of trumpets" (II, 27-28).

Again, as in the "Ode," Keats says "a moment's thought is passion's passing bell" (II, 39). And as Lycius returns to his "sole self," it is Lamia who grows "so sad forlorn" (II, 49). There is, however, an important difference between Lamia and the "Ode to a Nightingale." In the "Ode," Keats employs the nightingale as a symbol of immortality and a means of achieving "negative capability." He completely empathizes with the bird, thereby transcending himself and achieving "negative capability." True, Keats questions the nature of his experience: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/ Fled is that music:--Do I wake or sleep?". But of course he awakes. He achieves the ideal of "negative capability," and the result of the experience is a glimpse of eternity and the immortal "Ode" itself. But in Lamia, Lycius' experience is quite unlike Keats' in the "Ode to a Nightingale." Lycius does not transcend himself through "negative capability." He is merely absorbed into Lamia, who seduces him. And seduction is not "negative capability." Lycius' absorption into Lamia is not a positive or creative act; it is only an illusion.

Now Lycius must be examined after he has fallen out of Lamia's illusion and returned to his "sole self." Immediately, Keats says that "in self despite,/ Against his better self he took delight" (II, 72-73). Here one begins to understand Lycius' true character, with his lower identity bulging. By acting against his "better self," that

part of him which could accept the mystery of Lamia and forget the desires of everyday life (that self which would enable him to function with "negative capability"), Lycius becomes as selfish and possessive as Lamia. Just as she desires to possess him, he desires to possess her. She is "forlorn" and cries "you have deserted me" (I, 42). She must have him back, but he refuses. There is the inevitable battle of the sexes in Lycius and Lamia, each attempting to possess and dominate the other. Lycius, however, is worse than Lamia. He wants to parade his "prize" (note the possessive image) around the town in a chariot like a circus freak. Being trapped in his "sole self," Lycius presses his identity upon Lamia. He asks her:

Sure some sweet name thou hast, though, by my truth,
 I have not ask'd it, ever thinking thee
 Not mortal, but of heavenly progeny,
 As still I do. Hast any mortal name,
 Fit appellation for this dazzling frame?
 Or friends or kinsfolk on the citied earth,
 To share our marriage feast and nuptial mirth?

(II, 85-91)

At this point, Lycius exhibits the zenith of his self-obsession, and "negative capability" is nowhere to be found. Lycius is "consequitive" in interrogating Lamia's identity, and this leads to a discussion of Apollonius.

VI

Apollonius is the most striking example of a man who fails to function with "negative capability." He is unable to accept a climate of doubt because he is a philosopher and a reasoner. Keats wrote of himself: "I shall never be a Reasoner because I care not to be in the right."² But Apollonius must always be right; he will not permit a mystery to exist. In Apollonius' case:

Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine--
Unweave a rainbow. (II, 234-37)

The philosopher's analytical mind struggles for the standards of science and empirical reality. Apollonius can never negate or transcend his self because he cannot succumb to that passive state of disinterestedness which is required for achieving "negative capability." Apollonius is continually arguing and actively seeking answers to "knotty problems." It has already been noted that he is a symbol of the "consequitive man." Keats portrays him as a sophist, whose main function is to penetrate and destroy illusions. Paradoxically, Apollonius plays the same role as Lamia. Lamia desires

²Ibid., I, 243.

to remove all reality from illusion; Apollonius must remove the illusion from reality. He, too, is only one side of the sphere, pain instead of joy. Like Lamia, he cannot function in a climate of doubt, but must have his own way. For example, if Lycius will not live with reality, he will not live at all--Apollonius will not permit his fancies. Again, Apollonius is a destructive force in the poem. Keats describes him as "severe," "austere," and "spiteful." His words are "sophist's spleen" (II, 172); and his eyes are like "a sharp spear...keen, cruel, perçant, stinging" (II, 300-01). He is a harsh and brutal figure of painful reality. Apollonius' greatest fault is that he sees through illusions, but offers nothing in their place. Visions or dreams are worthless in his philosophic scheme. He is not a poet because he can only destroy and not create. He is a selfish old man who cannot function with "negative capability."

So Keats presents all three of his characters as limited individuals incapable of functioning with "negative capability," and one can see the consequences they suffer because of their self-obsessions. The relationship between Lycius and Lamia does not fail because Lamia is immortal and Lycius is mortal, or because Lycius succumbs to an illusion; it fails because both are unable to transcend their limited selves. Both are self-willed and intent on dominating and possessing the other, and neither can function in a climate of doubt. Lamia cannot handle real life, and Lycius is

afraid of "faery land." Apollonius is limited in that he refuses to see the worth of any illusion. He is the embodiment of empirical reality and will destroy anything which does not agree with his philosophical scheme. So Lycius and Lamia die, and Apollonius remains--a most tragic conclusion, and a warning to those who fail to function with "negative capability."

VII

But, in proving that Lamia, Lycius, and Apollonius are characters who do not possess "negative capability," it is not suggested that Keats preaches a moral in the poem. Keats is very skillful in Lamia. Under the guise of a sensual seduction narrative and an ambivalent statement on illusion and reality, Keats succeeds in presenting a dramatic statement on the function and consequences of "negative capability." Keats believed that the dramatic mode of presentation was the highest that the poet could employ. By drama, he meant "the playing of different Natures with Joy and Sorrow,"³ and this is exactly what he does in Lamia. Lamia is joy and pleasure; Apollonius is sorrow and pain. What is more, Keats does not morally judge his characters; he merely endows them with certain personality traits. The

³Ibid., I, 219.

three characters are placed in a dramatic situation, and the conflict and action grow organically from each individual's self. Keats does not intrude his own personality into the poem. He adheres to his own poetic tenet: "Poetry should be great and unobtrusive." The conclusion of Lamia grows directly out of the poem, and this is good drama. The idea flows out of the image.

Concerning Lamia, Keats wrote to his brother George: "I have been reading over a part of a short poem I have composed lately call'd 'Lamia'--and I am certain there is that sort of fire in it which must take hold of people in some way--give them either pleasant or unpleasant sensation. What they want is a sensation of some sort."⁴ But Keats did more than give the audience sensations. Keats might not have preached a moral in his poem, but this is not to say that he did not have his speculations. In a letter to his sister-in-law, Georgiana, he wrote: "The worst of Men are those whose self interests are their passions--the next those whose passions are their self-interest." This quotation applies perfectly to the characters in Lamia, who are all obsessed with passions and self-interests. In another letter, Keats wrote: "A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory--and very few eyes can see the Mystery of

⁴Ibid., II, 189.

his life."⁵ True, there are no characters of any "worth" in Lamia, but the poem is still an allegory in that all of Keats' characters are bad exemplars, warnings against obsession with self.⁶ Neither Lamia, Lycius, nor Apollonius is able to see the "Mystery of life" simply because they cannot function with "negative capability."

⁵Ibid., II, 67.

⁶Professor Bate gives a similar interpretation of the "allegory" in Lamia in his Stylistic Development of Keats (New York: Humanities Press, 1958 [1945]): "With his conception of the necessity of hardship and experience and a somewhat changed interpretation of the word 'reality' uppermost in his mind, he transformed the little tale he had found in the Anatomy of Melancholy into what may very well be an almost dogmatically moral allegory. He seems to reiterate that the true poet must not lose himself in the world of the luxurious but, if he is really to know life, must be continually mindful of the sorrow and pain of his fellow beings" (p. 146).

Conclusion

The intention of this thesis has been to prove that "negative capability" exists within the characters of Keats' major poetry. The introductory chapter was devoted to redefining "negative capability" as a speculation on a style and ideal of life, as opposed to a style of art, and to contending that Keats found a voice for his speculations on "negative capability" in the characters of his major poems.

The chapter on the "Ode to a Nightingale" found Keats primarily concerned with "negative capability" as an ideal which greatly appealed to him and yet at the same moment frightened him. It was discovered that, although Keats desired to achieve the ideal of "negative capability," he suffered a conflict between the ideal and reality. In the "Ode," Keats' main difficulty was the use of an inordinate imagination (i.e., the imaginative "faery lands" of Stanzas Four and Five). But the conflict was much deeper, stemming from Keats' basic earth-rooted personality and his inability to understand completely the ideal of "negative capability."

The discussion of Hyperion suggested that Apollo was Keats' most powerful statement on the ideal of "negative capability" and the only resolution to the conflict that he suffered in the "Ode." As that chapter noted, Apollo achieved what Keats ideally would have liked to achieve in

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